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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interaction patterns of adult Vietnamese refugees participating in a job training program. Emphasis is placed on the relationship of interaction patterns to social identity and the criteria people use to determine both their social identity and their social interaction. Descriptions of the interaction patterns of the program participants include hypotheses about the influence of sex, age, race or nationality, and language on interaction patterns and social identity. One of the basic hypothesis presented is that people interact with those who seem to be somewhat like themselves and that very limited criteria are used to determine social interactions. It is also hypothesized that people who seek to interact with those who differ in key areas such as race, native language, and culture do so because they find such interaction more interesting or more suited to their social identity. (Author/EB)

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Vietnamese Refugee Students and Interethnic Communication

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Imagine yourself an immigrant in a foreign country. You have just started a six month job training program to learn a skill in a booming industry. The class is composed of natives of your new country, other transplanted Americans, and immigrants from several other countries. Many of the students, including yourself, are not fluent in the language of this country. You are told repeatedly to speak only your new language, but it is easiest to speak to the other Americans in English. Where do you think you would draw the boundaries of your social interaction in this class? What criteria would you use to determine who to talk to, who to work with, and who to sit near? How do you think your sense of self will influence your interaction patterns?

This hypothetical situation is played out daily in schools across the United States. The focus of this paper is on a small group of Vietnamese refugees who are currently involved in such a program. It is an attempt to make sense of my observations of their interaction patterns during the first two weeks of an electronics technician training program and to relate the Vietnamese students' interaction patterns to their sense of self, or their social identity. The ideas presented here represent one of my first attempts to impose a structure on the interaction patterns I observed, so the analysis is rather speculative. The primary aims of this paper are first to show the

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relationship between social identity and social interaction, and second, to outline the criteria people use to determine both their social identity and their social interaction patterns. These criteria fall into what I have termed "categories of affinity."

I use the term "social identity" to emphasize the role of interaction in our conception of both self and others. Our sense of self changes as our role changes and as we move from one situation to another. Following the insight of George Herbert Mead, many researchers no longer assume identity is fixed and stable; rather, they see it as fluid and responsive to situation, role and interaction. Social identity encompasses features of self including race, sex, age, ethnicity, class, occupation, family position, etc. These features can be isolated; we can talk about ethnic identity or class identity, but it is dangerous to cut off one aspect of identity from the whole without treating the interaction of the features within a given context. Researchers often mistakenly talk in terms of seemingly well-bounded categories, such as ethnic identity, when to the people, one aspect of identity is dependent on the others. For example, to many people, ethnic identity cannot be separated from race, social class, religion, etc. (Berreman 1975).

Social identity should not be described out of context. It is dependent on both situation and role. People emphasize different aspects of their social identity in different situations and to different people. For example, my sense of self changes as I move from the classroom to the conference to my home and as I change from student, to colleague to family member.

Social identity is a way of creating order in the social world. Each person gives him/herself and others a place in the world and a relationship

to each other. Social identity is fluid, containing contradictory influences which people continually sort and reorder. It is a process, not a product of human construction (Mead 1969, Berreman 1975, Goffman 1963, Berger and Luckmann 1967).

Leaving aside the influence of situation and role, I want to detail some of the influences on Vietnamese refugees' social identity. To do so, it is best to divide the influences into past experiences, present influences and future anticipations. For Vietnamese refugees, the following in part determines social interaction patterns and makes up their categories of affinity.

Past Experiences Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States with a sense of self based on social class, education, occupation, family, religion, nationality and culture. Their conception of why they left Vietnam was quickly incorporated into their social identity. There were clear and (to them) important distinctions between groups of Vietnamese, usually based on social class, and between themselves and ethnically different people, especially Chinese-Vietnamese.

Present Influences Removed from the environment which formed their social identities, Vietnamese refugees have had to evaluate the significance of various features of their old identity and add additional features. One influence on social identity now is the development of a

sense of ethnic identity as a member of a minority group. Refugees can choose to identify with any or all of the following groups: Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American, Asian, Asian-American, Indochinese, a minority, or an American. They can also choose to identify as refugees, which currently has some financial advantages. Other influences on current social identity are: student status, proficiency in English and language preference, social interaction patterns with non-Vietnamese, family attitudes toward resettlement, past experiences in work, school or training in this country, and stereotypes they have of Americans and stereotypes Americans have of Vietnamese.

Future Anticipations Students' perceptions of what they will be may also influence their interaction while in class. Some may see the training program as a step to a permanent job. Others may see it as a temporary measure until they can earn a university degree. Each person's concept of career will also influence his/her social identity. For many people, occupation constitutes a major influence on identity, and for most refugees, a career as an electronics technician is quite different from their career plans in Vietnam. They may also have different perceptions of their future social world. Those who limit it to Vietnamese will have a different identity from those who interact with a wide variety of people.

The influences on identity listed above fall into categories of affinity through which we draw relationships between ourselves and others and which influence our interactions with others. When we meet new people, we send signals about ourselves. Some of these are intentional; others are not. Usually the unintentional signals are visible and are the easiest to read. They are also the most influential in setting boundaries between ourselves and others.

These signals fall into what I call a fixed category of affinity. This category includes age, sex@ and race*. It is easy at this level to say that men, Asians and children are unlike me because I cannot become male, Asian or a child. This definitely limits the number of people I can say are "like me."

I can also limit my group of "like me" even further. There is a second category of affinity that is signalled either intentionally or unintentionally. This I call the semi-fixed category of affinity. Included in this category are aspects of our identity with which we are born, but which we can change. They include language, culture, religion and socio-economic status. We often use this category to draw closer limits. For example, now I can consider myself different from all Caucasians who did not learn to speak English as a native language, all lower or upper class people and anyone who does not share my culture. Generally we use these categories to narrow our social interactions. It is true that it is generally easiest for me to talk to young, middle class Caucasian American women, but what is easiest is not always the most interesting or rewarding. The fixed and semi-fixed categories combined determine most of our social interactions. When we enter a classroom as a student, our social interactions are generally with people who are similar according to these categories.

Those people who make it through this filter and are considered "somewhat like me" are further labelled. Two more categories, which I call the flexible category of affinity and the personal category of affinity include the traits we either choose to develop or at least have some control over. They include a wide variety of features of identity such as marital status and occupation (personal) and sense of self as athlete, artist, intellectual, music lover, liberal or conservative, refugee, etc. (flexible). Each person has a unique combination of affinities on the flexible level.

@ recent medical advances in this case excepted

* I realize that "race" is a social category, but the physical traits that denote racial difference are unalterable and easily recognized by most people.

It is logical that we often consider people "unlike me" through signals on the level of the fixed and semi-fixed categories because generally if someone is very different on these levels, he or she will have little affinity in the flexible category. For example, for me to try to find commonality within the flexible category would be rather futile if I encountered an elderly working class Japanese man who spoke little English. However, we often find unexpected commonality at this level. The elderly Japanese man may actually be an anthropologist whose work I admire. Anything that will make someone seem "somewhat like me" will break down the barriers set by the fixed and semi-fixed categories.

We are rarely forced to interact with people who differ radically from ourselves, but the job training program in which my observations take place encourages such interaction. It is a private training center which accepts only students eligible for federal assistance (CETA, Welfare, Migrant Workers). The staff attempts to match the class composition with the composition of the unemployed or low income people in the county it serves. The class I am observing consists of six Vietnamese, six Blacks, eight Spanish speakers, two Koreans, three Filipinos and seven Whites. English is not the first language of most of the students, and ability to speak English varies greatly. The students are being trained to work as electronics technicians which does not demand fluency, but does demand control of English and minimal mathematical capability.

Because of the emphasis on mathematics, the Vietnamese students have an interesting position in the class. Although their English is far from fluent, their background in math is strong. In Vietnam, any student graduating from high school has usually completed a series of courses up to and including calculus. Few of the other students, on the other hand,

have much mathematical training. This has opened communication channels between several Vietnamese students and other students. The other students soon realized that the Vietnamese understood math processes they were struggling with. Although the role of tutor could facilitate social interaction forall of the Vietnamese if they wanted it, only a few take advantage of this role.A major function math proficiency has served is to break down the resistance of the other students to interact with the Vietnamese.

This class is broken into fairly equal sized language or culture groups. There are enough people in each group that no interaction would have to take place across groups, but it is also set up so that students would benefit from interaction with as many students as possible. The teacher encourages intercultural interaction, in part by forbidding (unsuccessfully) any language but English in the room. After two weeks of observation and limited discussions with most of the Vietnamese students, I noticed the following interaction patterns.

One young man never sits near other Vietnamese. He helps students regularily and talks and jokes with a wide variety of people. His English is probably the poorest of the Vietnamese, but he interacts at length with a variety of students, expecially two young Mexican men, two young Korean women and three Filipino men. He interacts with the other Vietnamese when they need to jointly work out a problem.

Another student, the only Vietnamese woman in the class usually sits between one other Vietnamese man and myself. She rarely talks to the man. She spends most of her time talking to me, but she helps any student who comes to her for help.

When three or four Vietnamese students gather to solve a problem, she usually joins them.

There are three men who always sit together. Two are young; one is older. They rarely talk to anyone else and communicate with each other primarily in Vietnamese. Few students go to them for help, and they rarely initiate interactions with others.

The sixth Vietnamese student is a middle aged man who rarely interacts with anyone. He sits alone; occasionally he talks to one of the Vietnamese students, but he generally works alone. Two young Filipino men sit near him and occasionally ask for help, which he usually gives through showing them his paper rather than explaining the process to them.

I can only speculate about what these interaction patterns mean in terms of social identity. The divergent patterns of interaction show that there are individual differences in where people want to draw boundaries between themselves and others. The Vietnamese students seem to draw boundaries at three different points. Most of them limit interaction to those of the same race, culture, language and sex. They do not seek out interaction with others, and they almost assure no intrusion by others by communicating primarily in Vietnamese. They seem to feel that differences created by race, culture and language overshadow any similarities in the flexible or personal category. Also, they may not see the job training program as a place to seek out social interaction beyond that which is easiest. Their interaction patterns are completely determined by the fixed and semi-fixed categories of affinity.

The woman extends her boundaries to include those who show interest in her, especially women. She is almost forced to go beyond her cultural group for interactior because she, as a young woman and the only woman,

is not "like" the rest of the Vietnamese students. Unfortunately, for the purposes of this paper, most of her interactions have been with me, and my interest in her is not the same as that of the other students in the class. She seems to see the class situation as a chance to improve her English and she takes the easiest opportunity to do that. She seems to want to find affinity in the flexible category, but she is receptive rather than assertive in doing so.

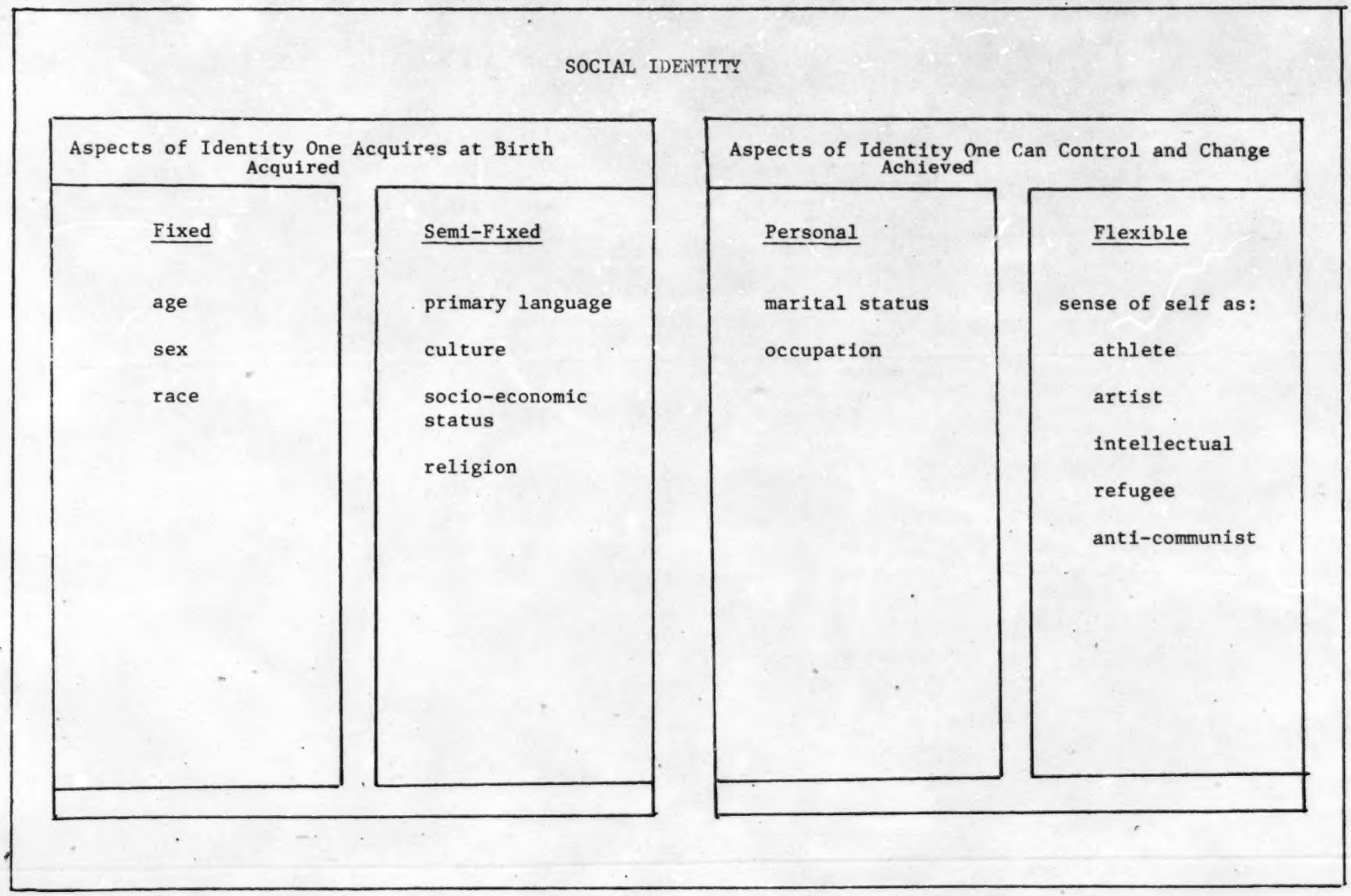
The young man seems interested in discovering commonalities outside the fixed and semi-fixed categories of affinity. Most of his interactions are with others who are not native English speakers. Possibly, struggling with a new language is a bond for him. Although he interacts frequently with other Vietnamese these interactions seem secondary. To this student, finding commonality in areas outside of shared language, culture and race may be more interesting than the security of the familiar. His sense of social identity as student may include learning about other people while he learns a skill; the other students may see the role of student as merely one of learning what is taught. Of course, this kind of student must encounter others who also want to interact with someone culturally different.

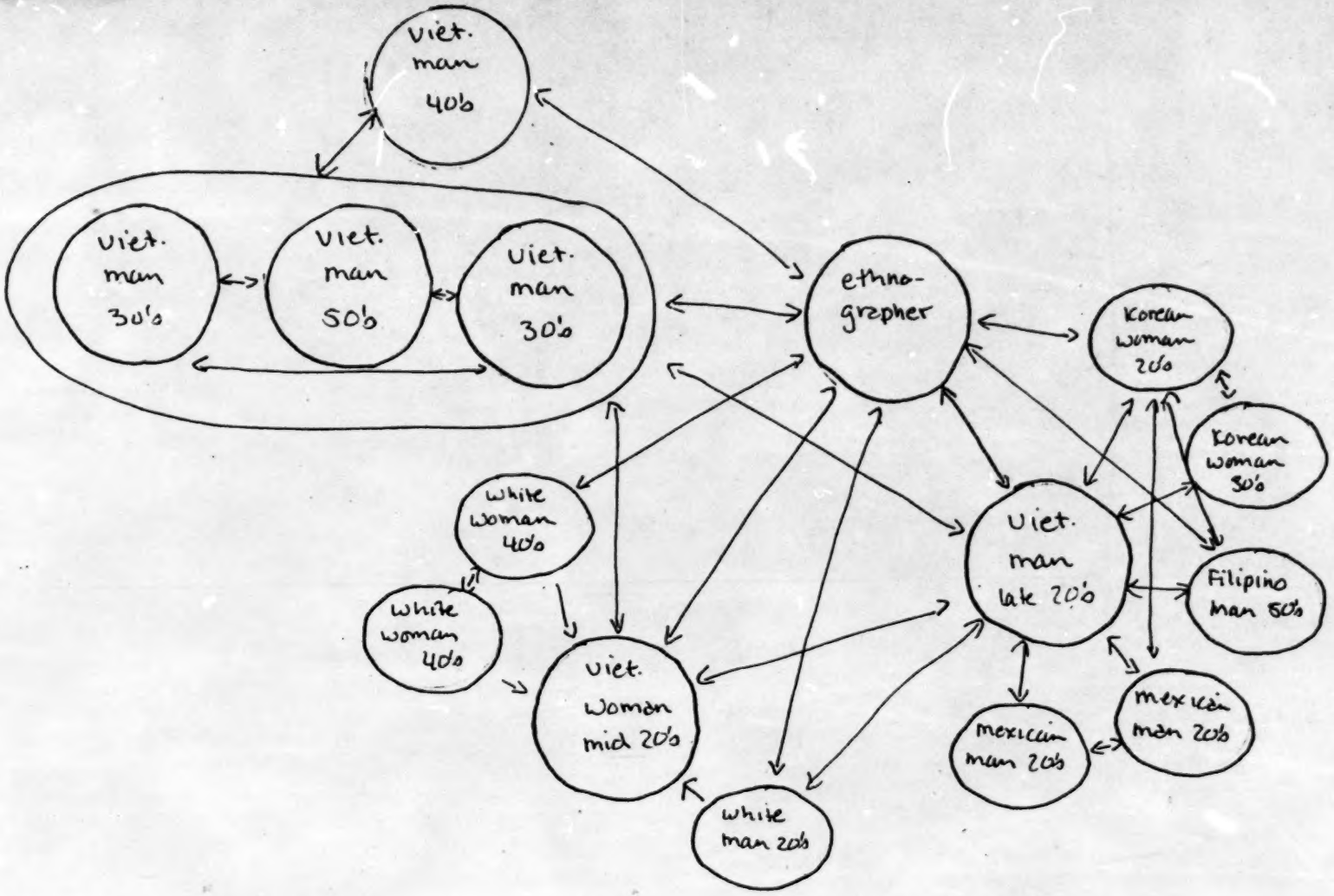
One of the underlying assumptions of this paper is that we tend to interact with those we see as at least somewhat like ourselves, but that interaction with those who seem dissimilar on the surface may reveal similarities in other aspects of identity or may be more stimulating than interaction with those who are familiar. It is here that the four categories of affinity are useful. Although we all have multifaceted social identities, we usually use very limited criteria to determine our social interactions. Few people seek to find similarity with those who differ in key areas such as race, native language and culture.

It is my hypothesis that those who do, are either forced to because of an inability to find affinity within easily recognized categories, or because they find such interaction more interesting or more suited to their social identity. They may also have different perceptions of their future social world and may assume that in a plural society they must have a plural social world.

We must realize when researching social interaction that people do not always form boundaries with the same criteria. I cannot, at this point, claim to understand the connection between social identity and social interaction. However, I believe that we cannot understand social identity without observing social interaction, and we cannot make sense out of social interaction without accounting for the social identity of the participants.

CATEGORIES OF AFFINITY





Social interaction network of 6 Vietnamese students

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